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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted concerning television program decision-making based on a theory of human information processing. Twenty-eight programers from 13 markets completed experimental simulations of television programing decisions. Important steps in the procedure were determined to be evaluation, search for alternatives, and selection of alternatives. It was discovered that two types of programers, high risk and low risk, can be described in terms of the amount of weight given to available information, such as share of market, cost, strategy, feedback, and general manager's opinion. A theoretical framework for television programing decision-making was developed based on both this research and untested theories. Key variables in the refined theory include information inputs, input evaluation, and integration. Relationships among the important variables are hypothesized in order to predict what actions low risk and high risk programers will take at different stages in the decision-making process. (MKM)

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Theory Building in Media Decision Making

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Theory Building in Program Decision Making

> Broadcast stations are to serve the "public's interest, convenience, and necessity"--the Communications Act of 1934
>
> All broadcasters are concerned about is the bottom line--if a program gets high ratings, the programmer will continue to use it. If it doesn't, it will be replaced. Broadcasting is simply a business. No more, no less.

The preceding statements aptly illustrate conflicting explanations regarding the purpose of the broadcasting media. One can either know the purpose of the media by accepting the regulatory agency's definition of the media s purpose or one can know the purpose by observing how numerous programming decisions are made and drawing conclusions from such observations. Kerlinger (1973) labels the first way of knowing the purpose of broadcasting the method of authority, while Littlejohn (1978) refers to the second as the method of experience.

Upon reading the two statements, the first question some might ask is, "Which of the two explanations is right?" A communication scholar would probably respond, "Each statement is correct under certain circumstances." The scientist, then, would be less interested in which position is right and would be more concerned about resolving the apparent conflict between the two views. The scientist would say the apparent conflict should be submitted to scientific scrutiny or "a systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed

relations among natural phenomena" (Kerlinger, 1973; p. 11).

Like others, scientists are interested in providing explanations for natural occurrences, but they substitute rigorous scientific inquiry for experience and authority. The goal of scientific inquiry is to construct theories of communication behavior. Kerlinger (1973) defines a theory as

> a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena (p. 9).

In other words, a theorist is interested in labeling phenomena, defining that phenomena, then specifying how they are related to each other. Kerlinger stresses the explanatory and predictive purposes of theories; however, Reynolds (1971) suggests that an even more basic purpose of constructing theories is to establish typologies, or categories, for the phenomena under investigation. Littlejohn (1978) also suggests that many theories include value statements and prescriptions (both explicit and implicit), despite theorists' contentions to the contrary.

Littlejohn (1978) adds an important note of caution for theorists:

> All theories must be viewed as constructions. Theories are created by people, not ordained by God. Theories represent various ways in which observers see their environments, but theories themselves are not reality...Because...theories and models are constructions, it is wiser to question a theory's <u>usefulness</u> than it is to question its <u>truthfulness</u> (pp. 7-8).

Dance (1978) also warns communication theorists about becoming enamored with a single method of testing theories:

> ...to limit a content area, such as human communication theory, to a particular methodology, such as the experimental or quantitative method, is to limit the questions that can be appropriately asked and the answers that can possibly be derived...theory construction must take into account all methodologies...(p. 7).

Gatekeeping Research

One of the most atheoretical areas of research in mass communication is research done on media gatekeeping. Most of this research deals either with the background of media gatekeepers (Cantor, 1971; Stein, 1979) or how they make decisions and what factors influence these decisions (White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Epstein, 1973; Buckalew, 1969-70, 1974). Two studies merit attention as theoretical pieces. Dimmick (1974) proposes an uncertainty theory of media gatekeeping which takes into account two major steps news decision-making: deciding what is news and deciding which news items to use. He discusses four major propositions regarding the reduction of uncertainty at each of these steps. Galtung and Ruge (1964) describe twelve qualities of news items that influence news selection and submit propositions regarding situations in which each quality would play an important part in a news decision. They propose that the more of the qualities any one news item possesses, the more likely that news item will be chosen. Most of the other studies deal with only one or a relatively small number of variables considered in the decision-making environment, and few attempts are made to establish relationships among these variables.

As the above discussion indicates, most of the research on media decision-making has been conducted on news selection. Little is known about entertainment program decision-making. One of the earliest studies on entertainment program decision-making for television was conducted by Lewis (1969-70). By factor analyzing programmers' responses regarding the relative importance of decision-making factors, Lewis found eight primary factors: direct audience feedback, government and industry regulation, indirect feedback (ratings), media critics, comments from production staff, programmer's personal attitudes

and experience, financial and programming strategy. Lewis took the first step in theory construction--constructing a typology of decision-making factors--but failed to go any further.

Not only have most of the gatekeeping studies, whether in the news or entertainment media, been atheoretical but they have also ignored the process nature of media decision-making and are of limited usefulness. From the beginning of the study of communication, scholars have paid lip service to the process dimension, yet despite periodic reminders (Berlo, 1960; Kibler and Barker, 1969; Hawes, 1973) few have accounted for process in their research. The most useful theory of television program decision-making will need to account for processes.

Several studies have tapped the process dimension of media gatekeeping. Bass (1969) and Dimmick (1974) both recognized the importance of considering the two major steps in news decision-making--news definition and news selection. Bailey and Lichty (1973) and Epstein (1973) studied gatekeeping on the media institution level and illustrate the importance of accounting for process.

Information Processing Perspective

As Littlejohn (1978) suggests, scholars approach the same phenomena with differing perspectives, and that explains why there are so many theories of human communication. At the outset of this research, it was assumed that one of the most useful approaches to constructing a theory of television program decision-making would be the human information processing perspective. This approach allows one to study the way in which programmers process information about programs in making their decisions. It easily lends itself to examining

typologies of information inputs, permits the researcher to isolate and define important constructs, and leads to the explanation and prediction of decision-making behavior. The information processing approach employed did not tap the process dimension of media gatekeeping, but process was identified by other means.

Anderson's (1974) information integration theory provides the basis for this research. This theory is founded on the axiom that in making judgments and decisions people employ cognitive processes analogous to those operations used in computing algebraic formulas. That is, people consider several different kinds of information and combine, or integrate, these inputs using operations similar to those used in solving algebraic equations. According to Anderson, two processes are at work in information processing: valuation and integration. The valuation process involves assigning weights to various information inputs, while the integration process involves combining these inputs using one or both of two classes of operations--additive or non-additive. When people integrate information using an additive operation, they combine these types of information independently. Thus, there are no statistically significant interactions among these types of information. In contrast, when a non-additive operation is used, people process information in an interactive manner. That is, there are statistically significant interactions among types of information. As one might suspect, not everyone processes information in the same way. Thus, one can increase the theoretical usefulness of this research by determining how television program directors process information differently.

This research was designed to be theoretically useful in several ways. By assessing the weights programmers attach to types of inputs, it is possible

to predict what programming choices they will make. By determining how programmers weight and integrate information differently and how valuation and integration differ depending on what step in the decision-making process one is considering.

Method

The structure of the program decision-making process was determined from data gathered in pre-tests, and it was refined from data gathered in this research. Programmers were asked to discuss a recent programming change in the late afternoon time slot--why they thought a change was needed, why they chose the replacement, the relative importance of various factors in the decision, and so forth.

The nature of information processing was determined by a field experiment simulating television program decision-making. Initially, it was hypothesized that programmers would process information differently based on whether they were making judgments about programs in relative isolation or making decisions among specific programs; thus, there were two simulations in the research--one to simulate judgment formation and the other to simulate decision-making. Programmers were presented with five types of information (program share-of-audience, cost, strategy, audience feedback, general manager's opinion of the program, all of which previous research indicated were important) about hypothetical programs then asked to make judgments or decisions regarding the program(s). Three levels of the five types of information were systematically manipulated in a fractional, five factor analysis of variance design.[1]

To simulate the process of forming judgments about programs, programmers were presented with twenty-seven hypothetical programs composed of combinations of the three levels of the five inputs. They were asked to indicate

how likely they would be to buy each program described. To simulate decision-making, it was necessary to present the programmers with two programs. One, labeled "Current Programming", described a program which had the second level of each of the five factors and represented the "average" program. It was held constant throughout the entire decision condition. The second program was labeled "Alternative Programming" and consisted of the twenty-seven hypothetical programs used in the judgment condition. Programmers were asked to indicate how likely they would be to continue using the current program or to use the alternative program.

Twenty-eight programmers from thirteen markets in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and North Dakota completed the experimental simulations. Ten of the markets were three-station markets; three of the markets had four stations. All the markets were small markets, ranging in size from the 62nd to the 116th market.

Results

Decision process. A model of the program decision-making process is presented in Figure 1. One enters the model at the Evaluation step with a program that has been on the air for some time. Programmers look primarily at the program's share of audience in assessing its performance, but they also consider the demographics of the audience it is attracting. The performance is usually compared to that of competitors' programs. As noted in the model, program directors also consider that amount of time left in a program's contract before deciding whether to continue using it. Finally, they check to see whether the competition has made any significant changes that would warrant making changes on one's station. If the program is not

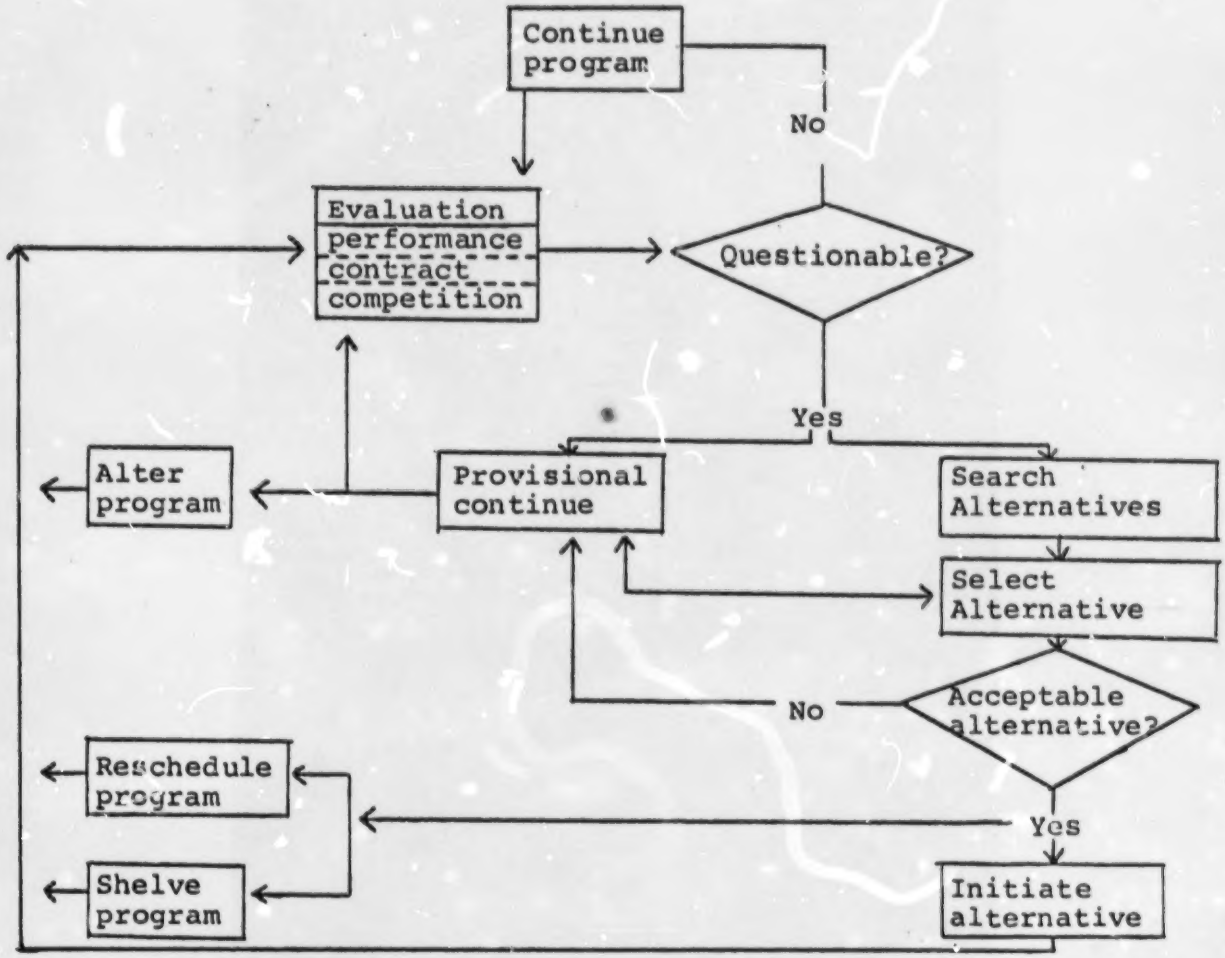

Figure 1 Revised model of television program decision-making process.

questionable, the program director will continue to use it. If it is questionable, the programmer usually continues to use it while searching for an alternative.

The Search Alternative stage usually includes a broad search for possible replacements either in a programmer's own inventory or in the market at large. At this step, programmers do not make direct comparisons among programs but tend to look at programs more in isolation or to compare programs to general standards for performance. At this initial search and screening step, programmers are more affected by extreme values of certain program variables. For example, programs that are extremely costly or those dealing with more adult themes are automatically disqualified for further consideration for afternoon time slots. At the Alternative Select step, the programmer makes direct comparisons among the alternatives and the current program in use and decides whether to keep the current program or switch to an alternative. One would naturally hope that programmers would choose the best program available. However, with the increasing scarcity of programming, decision-makers are more frequently choosing those programs which meet minimal standards or to use the phrase coined by former NBC programming chief Paul Klein in another context, "least objectionable programming" (Quaal and Brown, 1976). When an acceptable alternative is found, the previous program is either rescheduled or shelved. Rescheduled programs enter the model for further evaluation; shelved programs are often considered in future searches for alternatives.

Based on the data collected in this research, it appears as though the Search Alternatives step is roughly analogous to the judgment simulation in the field experiment. The Select Alternative and Evaluation steps are more similar to the decision simulation in the experiment.

Information Processing. One way to predict program choice is to look at the amount of weight programmers give various bits of information regarding the program. To add greater precision to the prediction, it will be helpful to determine how different programmers assign differing weights to information inputs.

The data are first submitted to a Q analysis[2] to determine types of programmers. Two types emerge. One is labelled High Risk because they want programs that promise the highest share-of-audience and are willing to take risks in doing so. Low Risk programmers are much more conservative. The data for the High and Low Risk programmers in the judgment and decision simulations are analyzed separately.

Using a method suggested by Levin, Kim and Correy (1976), weights assigned various types of programming information are assessed by using the range of marginal means for each main effect in the analysis of variance design. Table 1 provides this data. The weighting of various information inputs is nearly the same for the two experimental conditions. The major differences emerge between the two types of programmers. High Risk program directors place most weight on shares and pay little attention to other inputs, while Low Risk programmer give almost equal weight to most of the inputs. By knowing a programmer's information processing style and information about any particular program, one can predict whether he or she would pick any particular program.

It is possible to explain how programmers combine information in making decisions and judgments by looking at the nature of the operation(s) used to integrate this information. One of the two types of operations is used--additive or non-additive. Since a fractional factorial design is used, it

Table 1

Magnitude of Main Effects by Programmer Type

Input	High Risk Programmers	Low Risk Programmers
(a) Judgment Simulation		
	N=19	N=9
Share	11.50 (1)	6.36 (1)
Cost	1.75 (4)	3.93 (3)
Strategy	.51 (5)	1.89 (5)
Feedback	1.99 (2)	5.45 (2)
General Manager's Opinion	1.92 (3)	2.74 (4)
(b) Decision Simulation		
	N=17	N=11
Share	12.76 (1)	4.27 (2)
Cost	3.08 (2)	4.57 (1)
Strategy	1.33 (5)	2.99 (3)
Feedback	1.88 (3)	2.66 (4)
General Manager's Opinion	1.55 (4)	1.67 (5)

Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate input rank in terms of magnitude of main effect.

is only possible to test four two-way interactions. Since shares proved to be the most important input in pretesting, it was decided to test for interactions between shares and each of other four types of information.

The results of the interaction tests for the data from the judgment simulation are provided in Table 2. The only significant interaction is the Shares X Feedback interaction for Low Risk programmers. Generally, all programmers use an additive operation in integrating the five types of programming information. Table 3 provides similar data for the decision simulation. Except for the Share X GM Opinion interaction for Low Risk programmer, all interactions are statistically significant. That is, programmers tend to integrate inputs in an interactive manner. The differences between the two sets of data can be accounted for by the nature of the tasks involved. In the judgment simulation, programmers are not comparing two programs. However, in the decision simulation, High Risk programmers become uncertain whether to keep the old program or switch to the new one when both programs promise similar share levels, so they give more weight to the other types of information. On the other hand, Low Risk programmers are uncertain about whether to keep the old program or switch to an alternative when the alternative offers a share level similar to or greater than the current program. Thus, they give more weight to other types of information to help them make the choice.

Theory Construction

Research of any type is most useful to science when it is used to construct new theories or refine old ones. What follows is an attempt to contruct a theoretical framework for television program decision-making. Some portions of theory arise from data provided in this project, while others are based on other research but remain untested in television program decision-making.

Table 2

ANOVA Summary Table for Four Two-Way Interactions and Main Effects for Programmers in the Judgment Condition

Source	df	SS	MS	F	P
		(a) High Risk Programmers			
Share X Cost	4	43.52	10.88	1.31	.2746
Share X Cost X Station	72	598.11	8.31		
Share X Strategy	4	36.55	9.14	1.49	.2154
Share X Strategy X Station	72	442.64	6.15		
Share X Feedback	4	62.48	15.62	1.70	.1606
Share X Feedback X Station	72	663.63	9.22		
Share X GM Opinion	4	76.90	19.22	1.68	.1650
Share X GM Opinion X Station	72	826.07	11.47		
		(b) Low Risk Programmers			
Share X Cost	4	53.72	13.43	1.44	.2437
Share X Cost X Station	32	298.58	9.33		
Share X Strategy	4	10.04	2.51	.37	.8283
Share X Strategy X Station	32	217.14	6.79		
Share X Feedback	4	421.57	105.39	5.83	.0012
Share X Feedback X Station	32	578.72	18.09		
Share X GM Opinion	4	22.04	5.51	1.00	.4198
Share X GM Opinion X Station	32	175.59	5.49		

Table 3

ANOVA Summary Table for Four Two-Way Interactions and Main Effects for Programmers in the Decision Condition

Source	df	SS	MS	F	P
		(a) High Risk Programmers			
Share X Cost	4	606.11	151.53	9.75	.0001
Share X Cost X Station	64	995.16	15.55		
Share X Strategy	4	98.54	24.63	3.15	.0200
Share X Strategy X Station	64	500.72	7.82		
Share X Feedback	4	184.93	46.23	7.07	.0001
Share X Feedback X Station	64	418.55	6.54		
Share X GM Opinion	4	141.44	35.36	3.36	.0147
Share X GM Opinion X Station	64	673.38	10.52		
		(b) Low Risk Programmers			
Share X Cost	4	115.10	28.78	7.34	.0002
Share X Cost X Station	40	156.82	3.92		
Share X Strategy	4	132.48	33.12	4.15	.0066
Share X Strategy X Station	40	319.00	7.98		
Share X Feedback	4	184.48	46.12	6.38	.0005
Share X Feedback X Station	40	289.00	7.23		
Share X GM Opinion	4	41.37	10.34	1.56	.2038
Share X GM Opinion X Station	40	265.23	6.63		

One of the basic tasks in constructing media decision-making theory is to isolate, define and categorize key variables. These include:

1. Information inputs--those factors which influence television programs director's perceptions of individual programs and decisions when making choices between programs. Based on previous research in both news and entertainment gatekeeping, the following typology of information inputs was composed:
   a. Perceived content qualities of programs--news values or program qualities that make the content attractive to audiences.
      (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Dimmick, 1974)
   b. Media institutional policies and structures (Breed, 1955; Bailey and Lichty, 1972; Epstein, 1973).
   c. Interaction with media colleagues (Grey, 1966; Epstein, 1973).
   d. News and program sources (Gieber, 1956; Carter, 1958).
   e. Personal attitudes, values, and experiences (White, 1950; Lewis, 1969-70).
   f. Economic or financial (Brown, 1971; Barnouw, 1978).
   g. Government and industry regulation (Lewis, 1969-70).
   h. Direct audience feedback (McGuire and LeRoy, 1977; Lewis, 1969-70).
   i. Programming strategy (Lewis, 1969-70).
   j. Media characteristics (Buckalew, 1969-70; Harless, 1974).
2. Input valuation--assigning weight, or level of importance to inputs. The weight is then multiplied by input scale value given to prove an overall input value.

3. Integration--combining overall input values using either an additive or non-additive operations.

The second step in theory constructions is establishing relationships among important variables. The following is a list of axioms and propositions regarding television program decision-making:

Axiom 1--The program decision-making process can be reduced to three major steps: Evaluation of a program on the air, Searching for an alternative (when one is needed), and Selecting an alternative.

Proposition 1--The Evaluation and Select steps are characterized by choice, or decision-making behavior.

Proposition 2--The Search stage is characterized by judgment formation.

Axiom 2--Television program directors seek information regarding programs and assign weight to and integrate this information when making judgments or decisions about programs.

Proposition 1--The inputs that are relevant for any judgment or decision will depend primarily on the type of program under consideration.

(a) When making judgments or decisions regarding public affairs or "other" programming, programmers will give greatest weight to governmental regulation.

(b) When making judgments or decisions regarding entertainment programs, programmers will give greatest weight to economic or financial factors.

(c) When making judgments or decisions regarding news programming, program directors will give equal weight to economic and government regulation.

Proposition 2--The number of inputs processed will depend on the programmer's perceived information needs and decision-making style.

(a) Low Risk, programmers exhibit a greater need for information than High Risk programmers do.

(b) Low Risk programmers use a complex decision-making style while High Risk programmers employ a less complex style.

(c) The greater a progarmmer's uncertainty regarding the performance of a program the more likely that programmer will be to look for information from a number of sources.

(d) Low Risk programmers exhibit a greater propensity for uncertainty than High Risk programmers.

Proposition 3--The weight, or importance, assigned each input will depend on the number and nature of inputs processed and on the decision-making/information processing style of programmer.

(a) The larger the number of inputs processed the less the amount of weight assigned to each.

(b) Low Risk programmers give relatively equal amounts of weight to each input, while High Risk programmers assign most of the weight to the major input and give little weight to the others.

Proposition 4--The operations used to integration information inputs will be determined by the nature of the task and the nature of the inputs.

(a) Programmers will integrate the inputs additively when making judgments about individual programs.

(b) Programmers will integrate the inputs in an interactive manner when making choices between programs.

Conclusion

Too frequently communication scholars conduct research on interesting and important questions in mass communication without relating the findings to a theoretical framework. This paper has demonstrated that can be accomplished. Considerably more work needs to be done on this theory of television program decision-making, but it provides the framework for further research in this area.

Footnotes

[1] A five-factor design was used to increase the amount of information available for each hypothetical program. However, it would be unrealistic to expect programmers to respond to all 243 combinations of the three levels of the five types of information, so a fractional factorial design was used. Programmers only responded to twenty-seven combinations of the levels of information. Programmers were exposed to every level of every type of information but not every possible combination of each level. Combinations used were selected according to procedures outlined in G.J. Hahn and S.S. Shaprio, Catalog and computer program for use with symmetric and asymetric fractional factorial experiments. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Statistical Association, Los Angeles, August, 1966.

[2] Q analysis is a factor analytic technique used to factor analyze people rather than test items. See W. Stephenson, The Study of Behavior. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

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